

Storytelling and Narratives in Qualitative Research

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Welcome and introductions

‘The study of narrative is the study of the way humans experience the world.’

(Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 2)

Course outline

10.00 – 10.20	Welcome, introductions and housekeeping
10.20 – 11.10	What is narrative inquiry? <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The principles of narrative inquiry➤ Why use stories in research?➤ Narrative thinking and reflective thought
11.10 – 11.40	<i>Workshop 1: Discuss how and why you might use narratives in your research</i>
11.40 – 12.00	Break
12.00 – 12.30	Forms of narrative: interviews, life histories, journals, (auto)biography, autoethnography, photos, artefacts, social media, blogs, small stories
12.30 – 13.00	<i>Workshop 2: Part I - write your own story</i>
13.00 – 13.45	Lunch
13.45 – 14.00	<i>Workshop 2: Part II - sharing our stories and reflections</i>
14.00 – 14.30	Narrative interviewing
14.30 – 15.45	<i>Workshop 3: narrative interviewing</i>
15.45 – 16.00	Summary, reflections and final questions

Part 1: What is narrative inquiry?

- The principles of narrative inquiry
- Why use stories in research?
- Narrative thinking and reflective thought



Stories and documents of life

'In the beginning was the story: for we are the story-narrating animals ceaselessly creating stories and dwelling in story telling societies. As we humans tell our stories, listen to the stories of others, and story our lives, our tales come to haunt, shape and transform our social worlds. Such stories come to be found in our documents of life littering our lives from birth to death ... These stories have significance and we need always be mindful of the tales we tell and the tales we hear: for stories have consequences.'

(Plummer, 2013: 209)

The principles

- Qualitative method focusing on understanding of a phenomenon or experience
- Does not formulate logical or scientific explanations
- Changes the question – *‘how do I know the truth?’*
- To – *‘How do we come to endow experience with meaning?’* (Richard Rorty, philosopher)
- Narrative is a vital human activity that structures experience and gives it meaning
- Allows for collaboration between researcher and participant
- Involves reflexivity
- Contains a plot, characters, and settings



What
distinguishes
narrative as a
mode of
inquiry?

- **Process:** a narrator or participant tells or narrates
- **Product:** the story / narrative told
- **Means** by which you **gather data**
- Form of **data gathered**
- Form in which you might **write up your research**

Why use stories in research?



- You gain access to the personal experiences of the storyteller
- They frame, highlight and reveal life as experiences in a narrative structure
- There is a power in stories which communicate human meaning and experience
- This story is the unit of analysis

'All sorrows can be born if you put them in a story or tell a story about them.'

(Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958 cited in Plummer 2013)

Questions

- *What does the term 'story' mean to you in the context of narrative research?*
- *What are the challenges in convincing audiences of the value of research called stories?*

Stories or narratives?

- Often used interchangeably
- **Story**: more appropriate when speaking in a familiar, personal or conversational way
- **Narrative**: a particular genre with formal characteristics
- A story is always a narrative, but narrative structure is not limited to story
- Story = *'A narrative structure that organizes or emplots human events. It is a construction by the teller or narrator.'* (Kramp, 2004: 106)



Characteristics of stories

- Narrative understanding involves inspecting both the inner and outer life of stories
- **Inner life:** ‘a story inside a text, with its own happenings and plots, its own characters, archetypes, mythologies, story lines and themes’
- **Outer life:** ‘what happens to the story in the wider social world (sometimes called narrative reality): where the story moves, who “reads” it and what it does’ (see Plummer 2013)

Characteristics can include...

1. **Narrative meanings:** how do stories help us to make sense of our worlds?
2. **Narrative others and narrative dialogue**
3. **Narrative flows**
4. **Narrative embodiment and narrative sensualisation:** *'stories become embodied; they structure our sentimental life and feelings; they connect to our senses; we perform them as they help shape our moods.'*
5. **Narrative inequalities:** not all tales can be equally told or equally heard.
6. **Narrative power:** the capacities of others to control or regulate the voices of others
7. **Narrative space and global narratives** (see Plummer 2013)



The importance of context

- In qualitative research we focus on **context**
- Narrator's use of context to connect and situate experiences so they structure **life as experienced**
- **Time** and **place** provide a setting for **plot** and **character**
- Disparate events are made **meaningful**
- A narrative is **constructed**



What makes a good narrative?

- Narrative relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability
- Not striving for causality (i.e. cause and effect)
- Focus on ‘the whole’
- The overall narrative: on ‘*change from “beginning” to “end”.*’ (Polkinghorne, 1988: 116)
- How do we go-between the whole and the detail when writing?

Narrative thinking and reflective thought

- Stories preserve memories, prompt reflections, connect past and present, and envision our future
- Narratives reflect:
 - **Perspective** of narrator
 - **Intentionality** of narrator
 - **Point of view** of narrator
- The researcher is not an objective bystander



Reflexivity

- Feminist writers and ethnographers challenged the authority of research data
- *'The view from nowhere was always in fact a view from somewhere.'* (Spencer, 2001: 444)
- Awareness of our own role strengthens our critical reflection
- The researcher's experiences, feelings, values, beliefs and social position are important



Designing a narrative inquiry 1

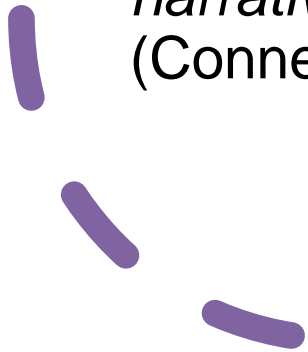
- Careful articulation of what you want to know
- Listening and re-listening to participants' stories
- Reading and re-reading your analysis and interpretation of stories
- And your final account and presentation of findings
- Can be laborious and time-consuming

Designing a narrative inquiry 2

- Interviews are recorded and transcribed
- Gives the narrator personal freedom and choice in telling their story
- Research access, collaborative research and building relationships is important



Empowering relationships involve feelings of “*connectedness*” *that are developed in situations of equality, caring and mutual purpose, and intention.*’ (Hogan, 1988: 12)



Participant and researcher narratives become ‘*a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry.*’ (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 5)



Questions to consider 1

- Is narrative inquiry appropriate for answering your research question and addressing aims?
 - I.e. focus on describing the phenomenon, not explaining it
 - Can help 'give voice' to powerless groups/individuals
- Could it be used alongside other methods as part of a mixed methods study?
- Which forms of narrative are useful for your study?



Questions to consider 2

- Do you have access to participants?
 - Can you foster (long-term) collaborative relationships with them?
- Will you also become part of the process?
 - Are you prepared for a shared narrative construction?
- How will you analyse your data?

Workshop 1:

Discuss how and why you might use narratives in your research

Part 2: Forms of narrative

- What does narrative mean to qualitative researchers?
- Examples of narrative
- New sources

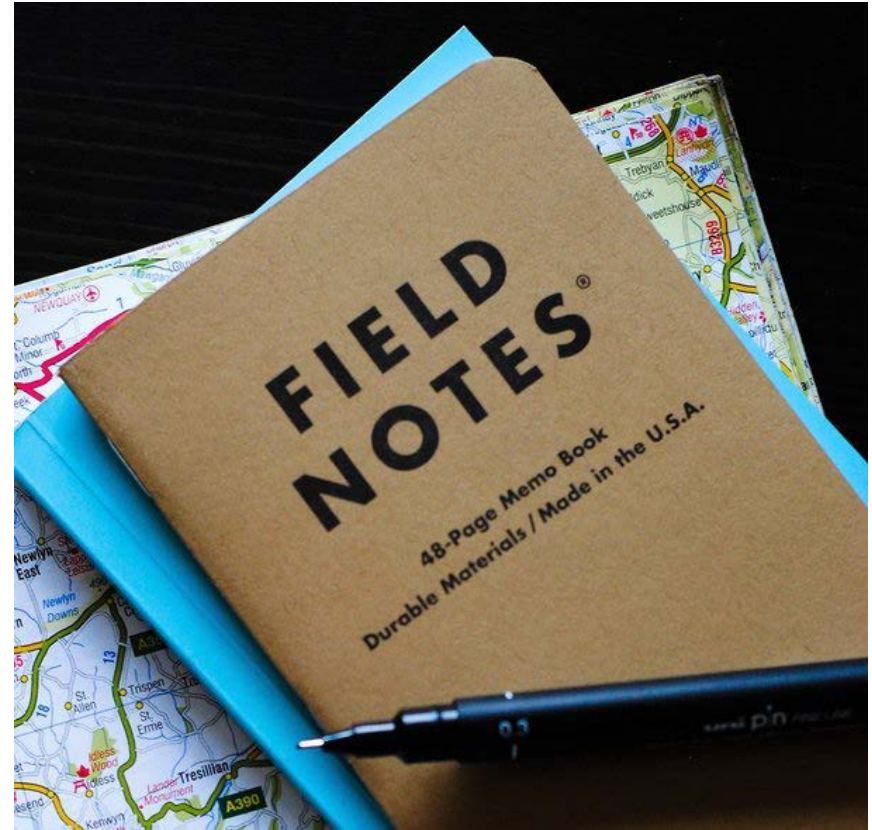


What does narrative mean for qualitative researchers?

- An ambiguous term
- Traditionally understood in a general way inclusive of various responses
- I.e. short answers to questions, write-ups of field notes, transcriptions of interviews, case studies and autobiographies
- Examples of the forms that narrative data can take...

Field notes

- Collected through participant observation in a shared setting
- Notes as recording of construction of events
- 'Active recording'
- The ways in which we see the researcher expressing personal practical knowing in their work
- Events can be recorded without the researcher's interpretation
- 'Thick description' (Geertz, 1973)





Interviews

- The **unstructured interview** or **narrative interview**
- Conducted between researcher and participant
- Recorded and transcripts are made
- Data can be made available for further discussion
- Usually involves collaboration and co-production of final narrative
- Becomes part of the ongoing narrative record

Short stories within a qualitative interview transcript

- Often stories will emerge organically during a qualitative interview (i.e. semi-structured)
- Can be analyzed using narrative approach but be wary of comparison across the data set in terms of where, and for who, stories emerge
- Interview transcripts as narratives?



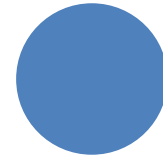
Journals, storytelling and letter writing or emails

- **Journals:** made by participants in practical setting:
 - Made by both participants, researchers or practitioners
- **Storytelling:** an individual's lived stories:
 - Told by participants as they describe work and explain actions
 - Note of caution: the tendency to explain through stories can easily be misinterpreted as establishing causal links
- **Letter writing:** way of engaging in written dialogue between researcher and participants

- **(Auto)biographical writing:** a form of writing that makes the researcher's experiences a topic of investigation
- **Autoethnography:** *'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.'* (Ellis et al. 2011)
- **Life histories:** present the individual's subjective evaluation of their experiences:
 - An 'account of a life'

WHAT'S YOUR
STORY

(Auto)biographical writing





Other sources

- **Other artifacts:** art, poetry, organizational materials, tv, radio, film theatre
- **Social media / internet:**
 - I.e. Facebook, Twitter, blogs, forums
- 'Big' and 'small' narratives

Visual narrative inquiry

- Photographs, picturing, animation, video diaries, objects
- **Photo elicitation:** using one or more images during data collection to elicit comments from participants
- **Photo voice:** photographs are generated by participants and then used as data and/or introduced into interviews/focus groups as photo elicitation
- The images help to 'create conduits to narratives' (Hurworth et al., 2005)



Babies Removed at Birth (Marsh 2018)

- Study of mothers' and midwives' experiences of babies removed at birth
- Introduction of photographs into narrative interviews and focus groups contributed to greater insight into human experience than that from oral data alone
- Stages of data collection with participants:
 1. First interview was used to collect demographical information, explain the research process, gain consent and begin developing rapport with the participants
 2. The second interview/focus group was undertaken and participants were invited to share their individual stories.
 3. After the second interview, all participants were invited to take photographs of what they felt, most likely represented their thoughts and feelings of the experience they shared.
 4. At the third interview participants were asked to share the images they had taken.

Poverty 2 Security Project



- Research collaboration developed an 'infographic'
- ATD Fourth World, Dole Animators and Thrive Teesside worked with a graphic designer (Dan Farley) and researcher (Dr Ruth Patrick) to explore solutions to problems of poverty and insecurity in the UK
- Experiences of poverty and out-of-work benefit receipt
- *'Voices of experience coming together to solve poverty'*
- <https://www.poverty2solutions.org/our-story>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDVBB4VLce0&feature=youtu.be>

Dying in the Margins (University of Glasgow)

- 4 year ESRC funded study (2019 – 2023)
- Focuses on ‘uncovering the reasons for unequal access to home dying for the socio-economically deprived’
- Aims to examine, in a participatory way involving people who are socio-economically deprived and are at the end of their life, or recently bereaved
- Recruited participants who are both living in an area of socio-economic deprivation and who self-identify as 'struggling to make ends meet'
- Methods: 1) photovoice; 2) digital storytelling; 3) documentary photographer; 4) public exhibitions
- <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/endoflifestudies/projects/dyinginthemargins/#ouraim,ourobjectives,ourmethods,digitalstories>



Commonalities in narratives

- **Narrator:** the storyteller is given authority
- **Plot:** constructed by narrator, selecting and sequencing actions and events, imposing meaning on these (**emplotment**)
- Characters
- Motives
- Scene and context
- Time / chronology
- Values / life lessons



Innovations: a 'small stories' approach to narratives

Issues and questions for dominant narrative paradigms include:

- Do all stories have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end?
- What is the required length of a story, to qualify as a narrative?
- Are narratives always textual?
- What about different societal and cultural constructions of narratives?
- Information & communication technology



Small stories research (Georgakopoulou, 2014)

- A paradigm for narrative and identities analysis
- Counter-move to dominant models of narrative studies:
 - Defined narrative restrictively and on the basis of textual criteria
 - Privileged the long, relatively uninterrupted, teller-led accounts of past events or of one's life story, typically elicited in research interview situations
- Recognizing 'the pluralism, heterogeneity and productive co-existence of narrative activities, big and small, in the same event, by the same teller, and so on.' (2014: 3)

Small stories research

- *'In reality many of our stories are "messy", with no easily identifiable endpoints, that develop in different environments and media.'* (Georgakopoulou, 2014: 4)
- Genre of 'small stories' she calls 'breaking news':
 - Stories of very recent (yesterday) and in some cases evolving (just now) events that, once introduced into a conversation can be further updated
- Small stories 'emerge as the *counter-stories*, the stories that are not encouraged or allowed in specific environments, that do not fit expectations of who the tellers should be and what stories they tell.' (2014: 10)
- Social media: text messages, Facebook status, Twitter tweets and re-tweets



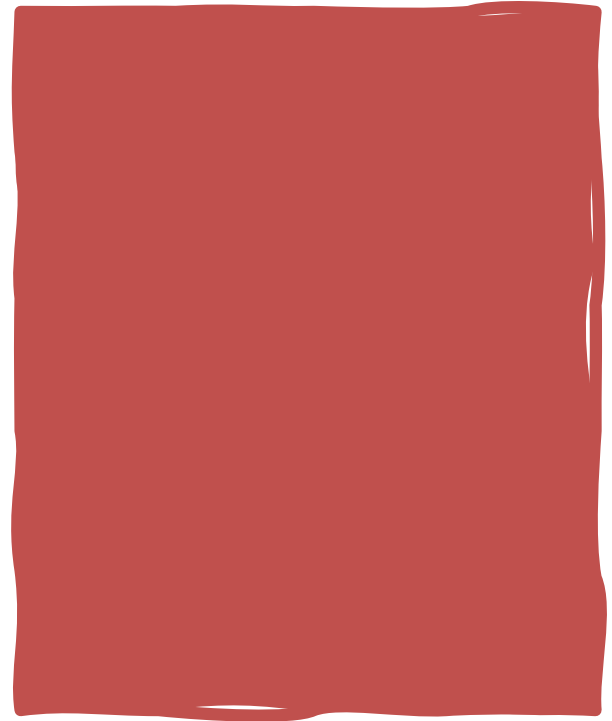
Discussion:

1. *Which forms of narrative might you use to collect your participants' stories?*
2. *Are you convinced by the argument for 'small stories'?*

Workshop 2:

*Write your
own story*

Part 3: Narrative interviewing

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Narrative interviewing (NI)

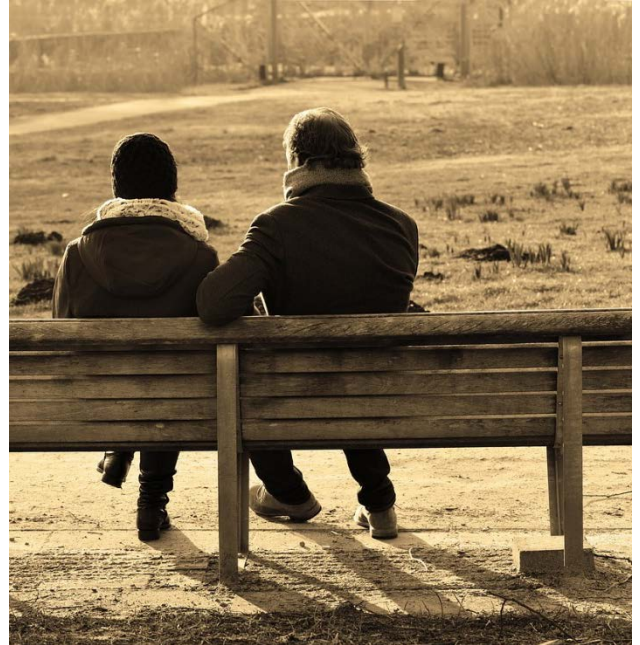
- Encourages interviewee to tell a story about a significant event in their life and social context (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)
- Systemization of this technique by Schütze (1977)
- Reconstruct social events from the perspective of interviewees as directly as possible
- A narration is *'elicited on the basis of particular clues, and, once the informant has started, storytelling will sustain a flow of narration drawing on underlying tacit rules'* (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)

Narrative follows a self-generating schema

1. **Detailed texture:** the need to give detailed information in order to account plausibly for the transition from one event to another. The narrator tends to give as much detail of events as is necessary to make the transition between them plausible.
2. **Relevance fixation:** the story-teller reports those features of the event that are relevant according to his or her perspective on the world. The account of events is selective.
3. **Closing of the gestalt:** a core event mentioned in the narration has to be reported completely, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The end can be the present, if the actual events are not yet finished.

The narrative interview

- An NI goes beyond the typical 'question-and-answer' format
- The influence of the interviewer should be minimal
- The rules of engagement of the NI restrict the interviewer
- The NI goes further than any other interview method in avoiding pre-structuring the interview
- It uses a specific type of everyday communication, namely story-telling and listening, to reach this objective (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)
- The narration schema substitutes the question-answer schema



Language

- The NI technique contrasts different perspectives
- It takes seriously the idea that language, as the medium of exchange, is not neutral but constitutes a particular worldview
- Appreciating difference in perspectives, which can be either between interviewer and informant or between different informants, is central to the technique
- The interviewer should carefully avoid imposing any form of language not used by the informant during the interview (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)

The elicitation technique

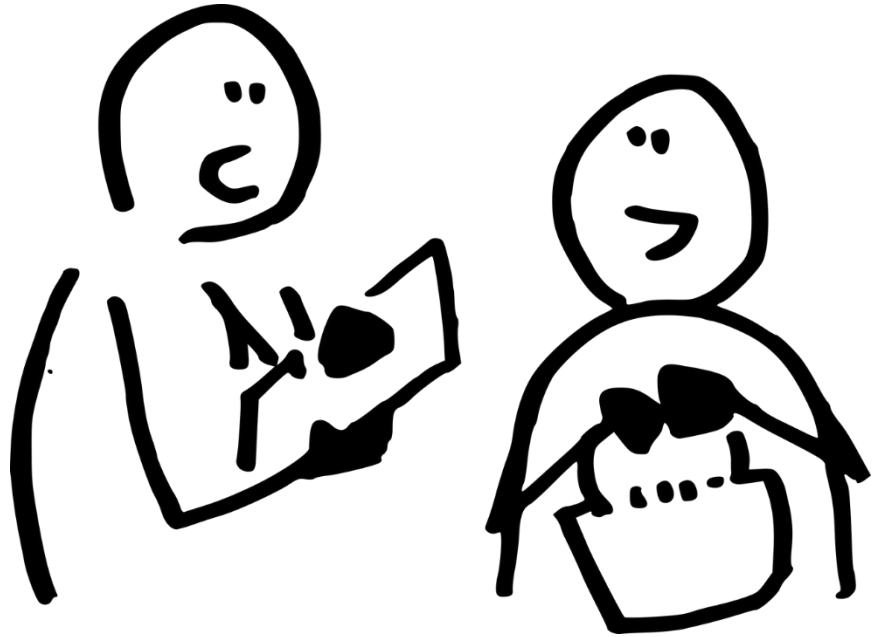
Table 4.1 Basic phases of the narrative interview

Phases	Rules
Preparation	Exploring the field Formulating exmanent questions
1 Initiation	Formulating initial topic for narration Using visual aids
2 Main narration	No interruptions Only non-verbal encouragement to continue story-telling Wait for the coda
3 Questioning phase	Only 'What happend then?' No opinion and attitude questions No arguing on contradictions No why-questions Exmanent into immanent questions
4 Concluding talk	Stop recording Why-questions allowed Memory protocol immediately after interview

Basic phases of the narrative interview

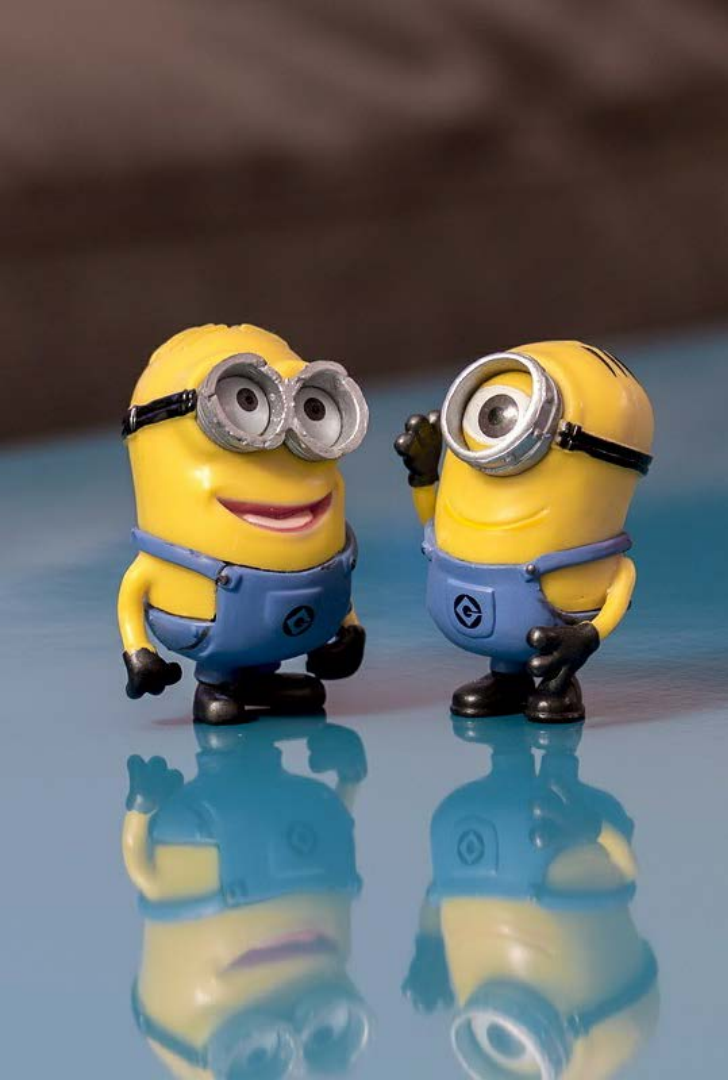
1. Initiation

- The context of the investigation is explained to the interviewee
- Ask for permission to record the interview and get consent from interviewee
- The procedure of the NI is explained: uninterrupted story-telling, questioning phase, etc.
- To support the introduction of the initial topic visual aids may be used (i.e. a timeline)



Rules for eliciting a sustainable story

- The initial topic needs to be experiential to the informant
- It must be of personal and of social or communal significance
- The informant's interest in the topic should not be mentioned
- The topic is broad to allow the informant to develop a long story which via past events, leads to the present
- Do not refer to dates, names or places. These should only be introduced by the informant. (See Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000)

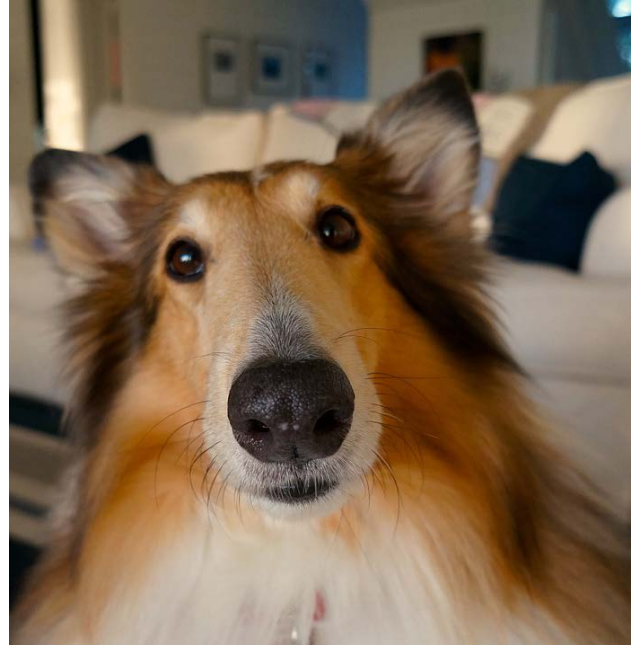



2. Main narration

- When the narration starts, it must not be interrupted until there is a clear coda
- **Coda** = the interviewee pauses and signals end of the story
- During the narration, do not comment other than non-verbal signals of listening and encouragement to continue
- Take occasional notes for later questioning
- Restrict yourself to active listening, non-verbal or showing interest ('Hmm', 'yes', 'I see')
- While listening, develop questions for the next phase of the interview
- When the informant marks the coda at the end of the story, probe for anything else: *'is this all you want to tell me?'* or *'is there anything else you want to say?'*

3. Questioning phase

- As the narration comes to a 'natural' end, you should begin the questioning phase
- Your exmanent questions as interviewer are translated into immanent questions using the language of the informant to complete gaps in the study
- The questioning phase should not start until the interviewer has sufficiently probed the end of the main narrative





Rules in the questioning phase


1. Do not ask 'why' questions: only questions concerning events like '*what happened before/after/then?*' Do not ask about opinions, attitudes or causes as this invites justifications and rationalizations
2. Ask only immanent questions (those inherent in what is said), using only the words of the interviewee. Questions refer both to events mentioned in the story and to topics of the research project
3. Do not point to contradictions in the narrative. This helps to avoid probing rationalization beyond that which occurs spontaneously

4. Concluding talk

- Small talk often occurs once the recording device is switched off
- Contextual information can often be important for the interpretation of the data, and it can be crucial for a contextual interpretation of the informants' accounts
- Here, you can use 'why' questions as entry point for the analysis, when theories and explanations that the story tellers hold about themselves become focus of analysis
- Rate the level of trust the interviewee places in you?
- Use a notebook to summarize small talk immediately after the interview
- Ask for consent to record


Workshop 3:

**Narrative
interviewing**



Take away points: why use stories in social research?

- You gain valuable access to the personal experiences of the storyteller
- They frame, highlight and reveal life as experiences in a narrative structure
- ‘The story’ is the unit of analysis
- We can explore various layers of society and social life via narratives:
 - **Individual stories** of personal experiences or events
 - **Collective / community stories** – the function/s they perform in and for groups (i.e. communities)
 - **Cultural or organizational stories** – i.e. the stories which professionals tell themselves (‘cautionary tales’ or ‘strawberry stories’)
- Which stories are legitimized, permitted to be told, or taboo?



Take away points: the power of stories

- They provide an insight into how we make sense of the world and our place in it
- Stories are transformative
- They bring about (social) change
- They empower and 'give voice'
- They provide rich detailed insight into the 'how' and 'why', going beyond statistics

‘Narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways.’

(Connelly and Clandinin, 1990)

Summary, reflections and final questions



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